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Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, Florida)

February 17, 2012 Friday
Palm Beach Edition**'NUBIA BILL' PASSES HOUSE****BYLINE:** Kathleen Haughney Tallahassee Bureau**SECTION:** LOCAL; Pg. 1B**LENGTH:** 461 words**DATELINE:** TALLAHASSEE

The body of a 11-year-old girl found decomposing in Palm Beach County has led lawmakers to look at broad changes to better train abuse hotline workers and child-abuse investigators.

A year ago on Valentine's Day, Nubia Barahona and her twin brother Victor were found on the side of Interstate 95 in Palm Beach County. They'd been doused in chemicals. Nubia was dead; Victor was severely burned and convulsing.

Department of Children and Families investigators had been to their house several times, but never took them away from their adoptive parents, who are now facing murder charges for Nubia's death. On the final visit to the family, the investigator did not even see the children.

The death, which occurred during DCF Secretary David Wilkins' first week at the department, led Wilkins and lawmakers to look at changes to the system. And Thursday, a bill incorporating those changes passed the Florida House, 119-0.

The changes will result in an update to child protective software system that DCF officials say is out-of-date and not equipped to handle all of the information from various agencies that may interact with a child. The bill, HB 803, also requires improved training of hotline workers. And all families being considered for foster-child placement will have to undergo a background screening through the child welfare system, as well as a local and statewide criminal background check.

Interviews with the child are also required in investigations.

"It's going to make kids safer," said DCF spokesman Joe Follick.

Separately, the department is requesting about \$30 million to modernize the software system as well as recruit and train new caseworkers. DCF is also trying to develop a graduated pay scale to pay them more.

Rep. Jose Diaz, R-Miami, who sponsored the bill, said that prior to working on the legislation, he joined child protective investigators on a visit to a family being looked at for child abuse.

He said one of the department's biggest problems is a 37 percent annual turnover rate in investigators. Many investigators and their supervisors are young and inexperienced, he said, and they burn out.

"It's a real tragic, overwhelming job," Diaz said. "It takes a toll on them."

Many changes in the Diaz bill makes were included in a grand jury report released last summer that delivered a blistering critique of the agency, saying it had failed the Barahona twins.

Diaz acknowledged that the agency has had a problematic past, with high profile cases where children were found at risk. Prior to the Barahona case, DCF was under the spotlight because a 7-year-old Margate boy hanged himself by a shower hose.

"It's a problematic system," Diaz said. "Taking care of kids in high-risk situations is never easy."

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GRAPHIC: Photo(s)

Nubia Barahona's body was found wrapped in plastic in a truck a year ago. She was 11 years old.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

'NUBIA BILL' PASSES HOUSE Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, Florida) February 17, 2012 Friday

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

SUBJECT: CHILDREN (90%); ABUSE & NEGLECT (90%); INVESTIGATIONS (90%); CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES (90%); CHILD WELFARE (90%); CHILD ABUSE PROGRAMS (90%); FAMILY (90%); CHILD ABUSE (90%); LEGISLATION (89%); TRENDS & EVENTS (89%); EMPLOYMENT (89%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (86%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (78%); FOSTER CARE (78%); EMPLOYEE TRAINING (78%); DEATH & DYING (77%); TWINS & MULTIPLE BIRTHS (77%); ADOPTION (77%); WAGES & SALARIES (77%); CRIME LAW ENFORCEMENT & CORRECTIONS (77%);

MURDER (76%); BURN INJURIES (76%); PARENTS (75%); GRAND JURY (75%); FAMILY SERVICES (72%); COMPUTER SOFTWARE (67%) CHILD; WELFARE; LEGISLATION; {ZONE}; PN

CITY: MIAMI, FL, USA (79%); TALLAHASSEE, FL, USA (79%)

STATE: FLORIDA, USA (79%)

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (79%)

LOAD-DATE: February 18, 2012

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